

MARCH 8, 1946

Spy Story

UNTIL the Royal Commission announces its findings, we shall not know the real story of the Canadian spy scare. In the meantime the story which we have been told sounds rather like a radio serial or a Hollywood thriller. And it is really not surprising that it should sound like this, for a considerable portion of the human race has become so used to radio serials and Hollywood thrillers that it expects nothing less from real life and would be disappointed if it did not get them. News stories must be made exciting or many people will be disinclined to believe them. In the present case, however, a more level-headed and more sceptical section of the public will probably recall such uneasy names as Arcos and Zinoviev; will reflect on a number of discrepancies in the accounts we have been given; will notice that it is only the *Canadian Press* which "learns authoritatively," the *Montreal Gazette* which "reports," and the *Ottawa Journal* which adds another speculative dash of colour to the already lurid picture, whereas in fact the only official details released at the time of writing are notably sober and meagre. If this is scepticism it is sensible scepticism. Such people may also pay some attention to the implications of the article by the American scientist reprinted on Page 14, as well as to the statement by Joseph Davies, former Ambassador to the U.S.S.R. to the effect that if the Russians are involved in Canada they are only playing the game of power politics according to the rules. Coupled with all this will go a feeling of dull anger and frustration that the nations should still apparently be playing the same old game; and a feeling, too, that although the Canadian authorities are fully justified in protecting the secret of the atomic bomb as long as it is a secret, the sooner it ceases to be one and is brought under international control the less chance there will be for recurrent spy scares to make the nations jumpy. When the facts from Canada are finally released they may, of course, turn out to be quite as sensational as some newspapers have suggested: but until then the wise course is to suspend judgment, remembering that while there is always a possibility that truth will be stranger than fiction, the probability is that it won't be.

LETTERS FROM LISTENERS

THE UNIVERSITY

Sir,—Allow me to express my appreciation of the attention you have given to the needs of the University in your issues of February 15 and February 22. The discussion of the needs of the New Zealand University, and of topics relating to University education generally, in *The Listener*, will, I am sure, be very helpful to the cause of University education in New Zealand. May you be able to continue the good work from time to time!—D. S. SMITH (Chancellor of the University).

EXODUS XVI, 19-20

Sir,—Twice in the last year or so I have been spurred by something topical in *The Listener* to sit down at once and dash off a would-be humorous letter, of ephemeral interest only. On each occasion I have immediately regretted posting it and have been relieved to open the next three or four issues and find it not there. But on each occasion I have later been startled and horrified to find it subsequently disinterred and printed. Both of these letters have borne my initials, and the result is that my friends are now treating me as one of these embarrassing people who wake up and give a sudden hoot of laughter long after a joke has passed, and who then contribute a small piece of repartee (already contributed by someone else) when the conversation has long since moved on to other topics.

In your issue of January 11 (which reached me on January 7) there was an article called "After the Last War." On January 8 I wrote and posted to you a letter called "Rehannibalitation" more or less relevant to this article. In your issue of January 25 you printed a letter from someone else who made the same point as I did about "Caesar's Third Punic War." In your issue of February 22, my own now thoroughly moth-eaten witticism appears. If you will refer back to a controversy on Bach's Mass in B Minor at the end of 1944 you will find I met a similar fate there too.

Now, sir, may I respectfully suggest that such letters should be treated like manna: those that cannot be used at once should be abandoned, and not held over until the worms have been at them. If difficulties of publication make it necessary for you to use them when they are in an advanced state of decomposition, would it not be possible to append to them their date of writing—like those little cakes of yeast (if I may borrow a simile from another quickly perishable food) which bear an assurance that they have left the hands of their makers in fresh condition on such-and-such a day of the month, which is a tactful way of saying that if the consumer finds anything wrong with them it's because the middleman has been sitting on them.

D.F.T. (Auckland).

(Matthew XXVI, 41, second part.—Ed.)

Sir,—Some of your correspondents (notably D.F.T., Auckland, and one Hunt, of Tauranga), in attacking my recent article, reveal a complete lack of appreciation of "atmosphere" and "colour." They worship the letter, not

the spirit, of everything they read, and know nothing of literary licence. Like the traditional pedant, they wait, vulture-like, pencil poised, for their prey, eager to seize on some minor and inconsequential solecism about which your average reader wouldn't care two hoots. What matter if Caesar was born 40 years after the Third Punic War? Why waste time, ink, and your valuable space in correcting an obvious slip, or are your correspondents merely trying to impress us with their omniscience? My point is that a penny's worth of atmosphere, plus reader interest, is better than a pound's worth of pernickety, pinpricking pedantry.
C.T. (Auckland).

FILM CRITICISM

Sir,—Recent issues of *The Listener* have contained several letters which base the conclusion that G.M. is a poor film critic on the somewhat flimsy premise that he disagrees with this and that reader about films. Such correspondents would seem to deny a critic the right which they obviously claim for themselves—the right to express a personal opinion. I, too, disagree with G.M. on occasions—but I cannot see that this justifies me in assuming that therefore I am right and G.M. is wrong. Cannot your correspondents be content to say, "That is 'G.M.'s' opinion and this is mine. Here's where we agree to differ."

G.M. liked *Meet Me in St. Louis*; only politeness kept "Hutt City" in his seat. "Zoilus" enjoyed *Colonel Blimp*; M.C. didn't. Why can't they all be right up to a point? The fundamental question seems to be—What do we expect of criticism?

Is it to be a set of arbitrary standards applied as a sort of yardstick to every work of art, by every critic? Or is the critic to be allowed at least a small margin outside these criteria, for personal preference?

It seems to me that no critic, however detached and objective his attitude, can entirely escape the influence of his own individuality on his choice. It is debatable whether it is desirable that he should try to escape it.

"PEGASUS" (Wellington).

Sir,—M.C., in his reply to my letter, asks why it is that if *Colonel Blimp* was of the standard I ascribed to it he was unable to appreciate more than two-thirds of it. Several possible answers suggest themselves; but in the interests of good feeling it may be as well to abstain from giving them. M.C., who describes himself as "a most tolerant picture-goer," complains of "the attempt to whitewash" the Colonel, and declares that the word "Blimp," like the word "Vandal," admits only of a hostile interpretation. But surely, Low's character is not that of the more generalised fool and dug-out, the same in all ages, but is intended as a social criticism of a certain historical phenomenon, to wit, the British "Officer and Gentleman" of (say) the Boer War era as he now lives among us. The film set out to give the case for the historical phenomenon by comparing him with his Prussian equivalent, whose consequences have been far more deplorable. If M.C. is "a most tolerant picture-goer," he

should be acquainted with the thesis that there are two sides to every question and that the defence has an equal right to be heard with the prosecution; further, that a film should be judged by more than other criteria than its agreement with the critic's social views. The Vandals failed to realise this in matters of art criticism and social reform; and it became necessary for their civilised neighbours to go to enormous trouble and expense to wipe them off the face of the earth.

ZOILUS (Christchurch).

(It is time *Colonel Blimp* was buried: we cannot admit further correspondence on this subject.—Ed.)

INTERFERENCE WITH 2YC

Sir,—May I add something in support of "Protester," Nelson, writing in your issue of January 4? The NBS are reticent regarding the cause of the inferior quality of the broadcasting from 2YC, but from careful enquiries it is considered probable that the sole cause of the distortion with which we are frequently regaled after 8.30 p.m. is due to the close proximity of an Australian station. Interference from this station was observed first during the broadcasting of the "Messiah" in December, 1943.

It is not known whether a complaint has been made to the ABC in regard to this matter, but no explanation or apology has been made to New Zealand listeners and it must be assumed that the policy of the NBS is to sit tight and maintain the original wavelength regardless of discords.

Here is an excellent opportunity for a keen press reporter to ascertain the true facts of a problem that has been in existence over two years.—"PROTESTER No. 2" (Palmerston North).

(The following comment is made by the Technical Officers of the NBS: "The correspondent is incorrect in his assumption that the distortion of 2YC's programme at Palmerston North and Nelson at certain times is due to interference from an Australian Station. Both these towns are in the fading zone of 2YC and as a result receive distorted signals from this station at certain times, varying with the seasons. The technical explanation of this distortion is that at these times the ground wave and the sky wave are of approximately equal intensity and the distortion occurs when these two waves go out of phase with each other.")

2YC PROGRAMMES

Sir,—I fully agree with "Mingo" (Trentham) in thinking we might be given a change in 2YC's early evening programme. At one time one could always turn on to 2YC and be sure of getting something worth listening to, but now from 6.0 to 8.0 p.m. the station is entirely given over to "Music for Morons by Morons"—demoralising songs by crooners and crooneresses. 3YL gives an hour of concert music, but unfortunately one cannot always get it.

MUSIC LOVER (Waimate).

ENIGMATIC

Sir,—I was listening to a recital (10.45, 2YA) announced as "Carnival of Animals," by Saint-Saens which, having started in the middle, suddenly shot off into the second record of Elgar's "Enigma Variations." We then had the third record of the Variations and the "Carnival of Animals" concluded.

M.A.C. (Christchurch).

(Our correspondent's letter is dated March 21. This may or may not explain why the music sounded futuristic, or at least enigmatic.—Ed.)